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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: SHIV SENA HEADS TO LOK SABHA, STATE
ASSEMBLY POLLS

REF: MUMBAI 130

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Summary

¶1. (U) The durable Hindu chauvinist political party, the Shiv Sena is at a crucial point in its 43-year history. Founded originally by the charismatic Bal Thackeray as an anti-migrant and pro-Marathi party, it has evolved into one of the anchors of the Hindu right. Through a combination of demographic and economic change, succession questions, defections and splinter parties, ideological challenges and its own poor record in office, the Sena has arrived at a crossroads. Recent electoral results point to the party's decline, but current leader Uddhav Thackeray is attempting to reach new vote banks and redefine the party in order to make gains in the upcoming Parliamentary and Maharashtra Legislative Assembly elections in the spring and fall of 2009, respectively. As he leads the party into this election, Uddhav's challenges are to maintain a firm grip on the party, limit the damage caused by his cousin and rival's departure to set up his own party, and give the party a vision to match the changing nature of Maharashtra's electorate. End summary.

History and Ideology

¶2. (SBU) Bal Thackeray founded the Shiv Sena in 1966, attracting educated Marathi-speaking, lower middle class youth by pledging to protect their economic and cultural interests at a time when Mumbai was fast becoming a cosmopolitan, diverse city. (Note: "Shiv Sena" can be loosely translated as Shivaji's soldiers. Shivaji was a 17th century, devout Hindu military leader in modern-day Maharashtra who took on the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb to lay the foundations of the Maratha Empire. End Note.) The Sena has an authoritarian structure centered on Thackeray, who expects complete obedience from his followers. The Sena appealed to unemployed disaffected youth eager to take back the streets through violence and intimidation. The Sena has thrived on a regional sensibility, utilizing mass propaganda, tactical violence, the provision of social services and strike breaking to attract followers and effect its agenda. The Shiv Sena's strongest attraction may be the perception that it can provide benefits which the official machinery cannot.

13. (SBU) The Sena's first platform was to insist on a simple but unworkable program: the reservation of 80 percent of lower echelon white collar jobs and economic opportunities in Maharashtra for Maharashtrians, and those who speak Marathi, the fabled "Sons of the Soil." To generate support and momentum, Thackeray initially targeted South Indians, since southerners occupied middle class white collar clerical positions, often encouraging his followers to use violence and intimidation. Despite occasional political accommodations with a variety of parties, the Sena has also been strongly anti-communist, and was used by the Congress and local industrialists to break the back of the communist labor unions in Mumbai in the 1970s and 1980s. Along with other Hindu right organizations and political parties, he has repeatedly opposed caste reservations, an unusual stance given the Sena's large "Other Backward Caste" (OBC) support base.

14. (SBU) However, as the salience of the Marathi "Sons of the Soil" card faded in the 1970s and 1980s due to a changing economy and diminished Marathi demographics in Mumbai, the Shiv Sena turned increasingly to pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim themes in order to widen its base and reach out to other, mainly rural, parts of Maharashtra. Thackeray maintained that Hinduism should be the dominant culture of India and adopted the BJP's slogan, "Say it with pride that I am Hindu." The Sena showed its strength in the 1992-92 communal riots which shook Mumbai following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in which over 900 people were killed in Mumbai, a majority Muslim. Thackeray encouraged his followers to attack Muslims and Muslim communities, and the Shiv Sainiks were protected in some instances by sympathetic police and government officials. Many credit the Hindu-Muslim polarization after the riots with bringing a Shiv Sena/Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in the state elections in 1995.

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Electoral Map

15. (U) In the Lok Sabha, the Shiv Sena currently holds 12 out of the 48 seats from Maharashtra. In the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, the Sena will contest 22 seats and its partner, the BJP, will stand for the other 26. In the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly, the BJP and Shiv Sena form the main opposition block. Together, the two parties hold 116 (54 BJP, 62 Sena) out of the total 288 seats. New state elections are due in September/October 2009. In Mumbai, where the BJP and Shiv Sena have ruled the city for the past 16 years, the two parties account for 112 of 227 municipal corporation seats.

High Profile Defections and Succession Crisis Weaken Party

16. (SBU) Since 2005, the Shiv Sena has endured a series of key defections and a succession battle, all of which have weakened the party. First, veteran Shiv Sena leader and former Maharashtra Chief Minister Narayan Rane broke with the party and eventually joined the rival Congress party. According to interlocutors, Rane's dissatisfaction with the Sena had little to do with ideological or policy issues. Instead, it was driven by a personality clash between Rane and Shiv Sena working president Uddhav Thackeray, the son of Bal Thackeray. The second blow came in late 2005 with the defection of Raj Thackeray, Bal Thackeray's charismatic nephew. Raj Thackeray formed his own party in 2006, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), discussed septel. Raj Thackeray cited his on-going frustrations with his cousin and long-standing rival, Uddhav, as his reason for leaving the party. Calling his cousin an ineffectual leader surrounded by cronies, Raj Thackeray said his rival was responsible for Shiv Sena's poor showing in the 2004 state elections, for the disastrous result in a 2005 by-election in Maharashtra and for several high profile defections.

17. (SBU) The rivalry between Raj and Uddhav had been a

long-simmering source of tension within Shiv Sena. Bal Thackeray has dominated the Shiv Sena since its founding. With a charismatic personality and florid rhetorical style, not to mention a keen sense of the dramatic, Thackeray was able to maintain the unquestioned loyalty of his Shiv Sainiks. In recent years, Bal's health has deteriorated, and this may be his last election. He has limited his involvement in decision-making and party activities, and he ceded nearly all day-to-day authority to Uddhav as executive president in 2002. However, many in the Sena viewed Uddhav Thackeray as an introverted, reclusive leader lacking in the political and leadership skills and charisma of his father or of his cousin Raj.

18. (SBU) Beyond Uddhav and Raj, however, the Sena appears to have no strong leadership alternatives. Bal's leadership style brooked little challenge to his authority and he often pushed rising popular leaders, such as Chhagan Bhujbal, out before they challenged him. (Note: Bhujbal, a prominent OBC leader, defected to the Congress, then the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), and is now the state deputy chief minister. End Note.) Former state Shiv Sena Chief Minister Manohar Joshi has been largely relegated to a supporting role, after losing a Lok Sabha race in 2004. According to interlocutors, Bal's failure to develop younger leaders or even mid-level party managers left a void in the party organization and weakened its long-term prospects.

Uddhav Thackeray Takes Charge

19. (SBU) Despite his uninspiring public image, many praise Uddhav for his strong organizational skills and sober leadership, and his attempts to expand the Sena's base. Thackeray was praised for fielding a fresh slate of candidates in the 2007 Mumbai municipal elections, which was undoubtedly a factor in the Sena's narrow victory. Political observers agree that Thackeray cleansed the candidate list mainly to reward his closest supporters, yet he and the Shiv Sena astutely sold the action as a move to clean up the corporation. According to Maharashtra Congress spokesman Anant Gadgil, while Uddhav is not

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a natural orator, he is a good organizer and the seasoned leadership has stayed with the Sena; he added "Raj just has boys," the young, street-level operatives working for him at the MNS. As Kishor Joshi of the NCP told Congenoffs, Uddhav has also tried to modernize the Sena by bringing more educated people into the fold and "growing the organization in a decent fashion." For example, in 2008 he appointed Maharashtra Times Editor Bharat Raut to the Rajya Sabha in Delhi. Raut claims that he was surprised at this honor, and surmised that the Sena wanted more educated and English-speaking parliamentarians who can represent the Sena in the more sophisticated parliamentary culture.

110. (SBU) Though Uddhav and the leadership want to redefine the party and lessen its reputation for, and use of, violence, interlocutors told Congenoffs that Sainiks who constitute the bedrock of the Sena's support continue to press for "direct action," the Sena specialty. The Sena has historically grown by attracting youth through displays of strength. Now that the Sena under Uddhav has begun to devalue violence - perhaps because many of the roughest elements have left for the MNS - potential members may turn to other parties, according to Marathi journalist Nilu Damle. In addition, observers expect that Uddhav will struggle to attract new followers in the absence of his father's charismatic presence. Nevertheless, with his father still alive, Sena followers will likely continue to honor his wish that Uddhav lead the party. As Damle pointed out, no one is left to challenge Uddhav within the Sena after the defections of Rane and Raj. The 2007 city election result solidified his hold on the party and his aspiration to be the legitimate political heir to his father. Damle commented, "Every day that the old man is alive, he solidifies Uddhav's position. If he dies, say, more than a year from now, Uddhav

would be a strong leader in his own right, and may not need the support of other senior leaders."

Long Term Political and Demographic Shifts Challenge Sena's Future

¶11. (SBU) The Shiv Sena is struggling publicly and privately with a number of other significant problems. Former Shiv Sena leader Narayan Rane's huge victory over his Shiv Sena opponent in the November 2005 Malvan district by-election race for the state legislature appeared to have precipitated a fight over the direction of the party. Few of Shiv Sena's current leaders have reliable contacts in the coastal Konkan region, and Rane's win, his dominance of politics in the Konkan, and his prominent position in the current Congress-NCP state government will make it difficult for Shiv Sena to maintain its control over the area, which was once an impregnable Shiv Sena bastion.

¶12. (SBU) Broader political and cultural shifts, as well as changing local demographics, represent the greatest threat to Shiv Sena's long-term relevance as a political movement in Maharashtra. The Shiv Sena's most significant electoral success was its victory in the 1995 Maharashtra state assembly elections, in part through its successful exploitation of the Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) message, in coalition with the BJP, following Hindu-Muslim communal violence in Mumbai in the early 1990's. The late 1990's, however, represented the apex of Hindutva's appeal to voters in Maharashtra, as development, governance, and other issues have also crowded the landscape of voter concerns. Local BJP Vice President and Spokesperson Atul Shah told Congenoffs that the Maharashtra branch of his party "no longer talked about Hindutva that much," as economic and development issues played better with the electorate. Without galvanizing events such as the 1992-93 Mumbai communal riots, Hindutva's ability to draw supporters will continue to be limited.

¶13. (SBU) Even worse for Shiv Sena, the "Sons of the Soil" movement of Marathi speakers, the original driving force behind the party's creation, appear to be losing ground to demographic shifts. When the Sena was founded in 1966, Marathi speakers made up about 40 percent of Mumbai's residents, but now represent about 22 percent. Each year, more migrant laborers from elsewhere in India arrive, diluting the urban concentrations of Marathi speakers, and making it increasingly

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difficult for the Sena to keep up with other broader-based parties. In the rural, Marathi-speaking areas of Maharashtra where migrants are few, this issue has not gained much traction.

Indeed, Uddhav had begun to quietly court migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who make up large vote blocks in some constituencies around Mumbai when Raj Thackeray launched his attack on north Indian migrants (see septel). Raj's astute political thrust added a new competitor for the pro-Marathi vote, and forced Uddhav to walk a fine line between assuring the migrants that they were safe in Maharashtra and appealing to his traditional pro-Marathi vote bank.

¶14. (SBU) According to MP Raut, the Shiv Sena can only grow "where it can find and exploit fissures." In a meeting with Congenoffs, Uddhav raised the possibility of reviving the decades-old controversy over Belgaum province, across the border in Karnataka border, where there is a large Marathi-speaking minority. He said that the current BJP government in Karnataka has restricted the rights of Marathi speakers there, but admitted the demand for this district's inclusion in Maharashtra would obviously cause friction with the Sena's BJP alliance partners. Raut told Congenoff that his party intends to campaign against Congress's record on preventing farmer suicides in eastern Maharashtra, its failure to add capacity to the electricity grid, and its poor record on law and order in the wake of communal riots, the July 2006 Mumbai train blasts and the November 2008 terrorist attacks.

Corruption and Conflict While in Office

¶15. (SBU) Another liability for the Sena is the negative perception of its performance at the head of the ruling coalition in the state in the 1990s. Although the Sena had campaigned in part on a clean government platform with its BJP alliance partner, once in office, observers agreed that the Sena engaged in rapacious corruption unseen in any previous government. An industrialist told Congenoff that the corruption and extortion from Sena gangs had gotten so bad, a group of industrialists demanded that it stop or they would go public about their complaints. (Note: The executive of a then-fledgling airline told Congenoff that Bal insisted on keeping the executive's new car when he drove it to Bal's house for a meeting. The executive gave Bal the keys, and took a taxi home. End Note.) The Sena scrapped its promise of 2.7 million jobs and subsidized meals for the poor, and did little to develop the eastern Maharashtra region of Vidarbha. With little to claim credit for and disagreements on several issues, the BJP began to distance itself from its alliance partner while in state government. As Marathi journalist Sachin Parab told Congenoffs, "The Sena and BJP have been fighting since the day they came to power."

Raj Rising: The Impact of the MNS

¶16. (SBU) Raj Thackeray's party will likely bleed some support from the Shiv Sena. As Sena MP Raut told Congenoffs, the MNS is not likely to win any seats, but it could very well "spoil our game." Congress spokesman Gadgil also told Congenoffs the MNS might pull votes away from the BJP and Shiv Sena, which could help Congress. According to Raut, the MNS has the potential to engineer the Sena's defeat in as many as five constituencies. (Note: Many observers and political leaders Media reports contend that Congress has nurtured the MNS in order to diminish the Sena, much in the same way it used the Sena to break the communist unions in an earlier era. End note.) Parab maintained, however, that Raj is still mainly a media creation; while he is better known around the state than the current chief minister, it will be all but impossible to translate this name recognition into votes with the MNS's current low level of organization.

Comment: Sena at a Crossroads

¶17. (SBU) In this Parliamentary election, the Sena is struggling to find a new relevance, as both voter preferences and ethnic compositions change. The Shiv Sena has endured many challenges

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in its 40 year history, including defections, bad alliances, and electoral defeats. The Sena and MNS are now fighting to become the champions of a shrinking pie of Marathi votes, the Sena's crucial but diminishing vote bank. As he leads the party into this election, Uddhav's challenges are to maintain a firm grip on the party, limit the damage caused by Raj's departure, and give the party a vision to match the changing nature of Maharashtra's electorate. Courting, rather than attacking, north Indian migrant workers may prove a better strategy in a city like Mumbai, where such migrants are becoming an ever-growing political force. Playing the Hindutva card in western India is also becoming less appealing to an urban electorate more interested in its own economic advancement. This election will determine whether Uddhav's attempts to make further inroads into rural areas, and court new vote banks have been successful. Many observers maintain that the party is shrinking, as Bal's departure from the scene and demographics work against it. However, even in the absence of a coherent ideology, the Sena's knack for re-defining the issues and focusing on local problems may yet serve it well. End Comment.

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